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ABSTRACT

Conflict is becoming an everyday, rather than an occasional, event in the life of a school district. Competing for a school district's public relations department time and resources are the public demands for accountability and curriculum revision and their obdurate stands against tax increases and desegregation. Under these conditions, it would seem proper for a school district to reevaluate its public relations program. This publication, intended primarily for educational administrators, presents an analysis of recent literature dealing with public relations between the school and the community. The author investigates many areas of public relations programs, such as recognizing the public's need for information, staffing and designing the program, assessing community attitudes, and selecting methods of informing the public. Also considered are some ways in which a public information program can be tailored to specific groups within the community. A 64-item bibliography is included. (Author)

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Ian Templeton

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CONTENTS

Foreword 4

Introduction. 5

Recognizing the Public's Need for Information 6

Staffing the Program. 7

Designing the Program. 7

Assessing Community Attitudes. 8

Informing the Public. 10

Conclusion. 11

Bibliography. 12

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Foreword

According to recent public opinion polls, administrators who try to inform citizens about their schools will have a receptive audience. The public is hungry for information about course content, innovations, college requirements, and the like.

Communicating with the Public has been prepared for administrators who recognize the public's need for information and who are willing to meet the need. Drawing from a variety of sources, the paper emphasizes practical steps for designing and implementing an effective communication program.

The publication of this paper is the result of a cooperative arrangement between the Clearinghouse and the National School Public Relations Association, an organization uniquely suited to help educators fulfill their responsibility of keeping the public informed. The Clearinghouse is pleased with the opportunity for wide dissemination of the paper that this arrangement provides.

The author, Ian Templeton, is associate editor for publications at the Clearinghouse.

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The simple fact is that an American public school district is so dependent upon its public for support, financial and otherwise, that it commits educational hara-kiri when it neglects the public, isolates itself from the community, leaves its citizenry either misinformed or completely uninformed. *Nagle (1968)*

INTRODUCTION

The well-publicized "taxpayers revolt" that has unsettled administrators and disrupted the educational process in many communities also points out the inadequacy of most school public relations programs. Too many such programs are based on guesswork. When a financial referendum is defeated, administrators must guess why. After they have assigned a possible cause, be it voter ignorance, opposition to school programs, or whatever, they must further speculate about what might be an effective campaign to gain voter approval at the next election.

Issues in school-community relations, of course, are not limited to financial referendums. Schools often find themselves in conflict with the community over educational innovations, desegregation, curriculum, and a host of other topics. In each case, however, the administration usually finds itself in the position of guessing both the community's attitudes and the causes of those attitudes.

Many documents examined in this paper suggest that much of the guesswork can be removed from a public relations program by understanding just who the public is and what its needs for information are. Other documents demonstrate how to design and implement an effective program for communicating with the public.

Recognizing the Public's Need for Information

One finding of Gallup's first annual opinion poll (1969) of the public's attitude toward education is that nearly two-thirds of those questioned indicated they would like to know more about the schools. When asked what kind of information they wanted, interviewees answered with specific references to content of courses, innovations, college requirements, and the educational process as opposed to school operations.

From the information gathered, the survey identified three major tasks of the public school system:

- First, to interest a greater number of citizens in the public schools
- Second, to increase financial support as needs grow
- Third, to create a climate in the community and in the schools favorable to an improvement in the quality of education (p. 23)

Gallup's third annual attitude poll (1971) dealt with the problem of school finances and showed that people regard finance as the biggest problem facing the nation's public schools. As an interesting sidelight, the survey revealed that, on the whole, the schools did not supply the public with the information desired. In noting the responses to a question concerning what is good about local schools, the report observes: "Such a question provokes generalized comments; however, the answers do indicate a lack of information about the special merits of any school system" (p. 35).

> **Fortunately, the public would like more information about modern education—the new methods being tried and new ideas about the kind of education that is needed. In short, they need and ask for the kind of information that is presently not provided by the various media of communication.**
> *(Gallup 1969, p. 23)*

That the public is interested in learning more about the schools should come as no surprise. The recent writings on community control of the schools (Belasco and others 1970, Hagood 1969, and Sussmann 1970) and decentralization (Gittell 1967) indicate an extreme community interest in the schools that extends beyond financial referendums.

McMahon and Strauss (1967) used questionnaires to obtain the views of Maryland community leaders on public education in that state. The authors claim their study has several implications for educational administrators, including the following:

1. There is an enormous reservoir of concern and good will for the public schools among all segments of Maryland's leadership and this should be tapped by making greater demands to fill needs.
2. School personnel must become more interested and skillful in making their accomplishments and needs known to the public. (p. 21)

In an Oregon study, Agger and Fashing (1969) assessed the effect a series of innovative educational programs for the culturally deprived would have on citizen support for the schools. The study included a communications model to help explain how community attitudes change. An assumption in this model was that "information availability, exposure, and receptivity are necessary conditions for attitude change." The three-year study also noted that the availability of information varies with the extent to which administrators are willing to share information on new projects and the extent to which channels of communication are developed.

> **The lay citizen is becoming increasingly sophisticated about the schooling process. Citizens are better educated, more inquisitive about school operation, more ambitious for their children and more demanding of school administrators than they have ever been in the past.** *(Fusco 1967, p. 13)*

In a New Jersey study based on interview responses, Wilder and others (1968) sought to determine the extent to which parents, teachers, and students agree on educational goals. The authors comment: "School systems are more directly dependent on the good will of their constituents than almost any other governmental agency, but since they often fail to know what parents are troubled about, their efforts to inform constituents often misfire or are irrelevant" (p. 2).

Atkinson (1971) summarizes the major issues involved in the public's need for information:

> While reluctance to increase support for public education need not mean that people have lost

respect for public education, it does imply that they are beginning to question administrators. They want information before they dig into their pockets for more money. They want to be better informed about education. They want to understand the modern trends, methods, and innovations that are altering the schools they attended. They want to know, too, what the schools are trying to accomplish and the extent to which they are achieving their goal.

But the public's appetite for more information relates to only one aspect of communication. While it is essential to tell the public about the schools, it is also incumbent on educators to listen to the public's response to information and, after serious examination, to use the feedback to improve future communication. (p. 27)

STAFFING THE PROGRAM

A necessary beginning for a school district wanting to improve its public relations program is deciding who should direct the program.

Many writers, among them Nolte and Murray (1969), Smith (1971), and Nellor (1971), recognize that all school district employees from the superintendent to the custodians affect public relations through their interaction with members of the community.

Although everyone has an effect of some significance, some are in a position to contribute to a district's public relations strategy in a more than casual manner. Kimbrough (1966) emphasizes the superintendent's public position, Blumenberg (1971) and Fusco (1967) stress the key position of the principal, and Fine (1969) and the National School Boards Association (1970) accentuate the role of the school board.

Those of you who plan to communicate through the board will be dismayed to hear that board members are virtually ineffective communicators. The research also shows that superintendents are generally ineffective—tending to talk only to members of the power structure.

(Banach and Westley 1972, p. 5)

In practice, the direction of public relations programs has often been added to either an administrator's or a teacher's other duties. This approach has two main weaknesses. An obvious one is that the communication responsibility will probably have low priority among other part-time duties (Harrison 1971). Second, the administrator or teacher may not be prepared to be a public relations specialist. Stiles (1968) observes that failure in school district public relations has been the most common reason for the dismissal of otherwise competent administrators.

Some unprepared administrators have withheld information from the community in an attempt to avoid conflict. Belasco and others (1970) point out that this is a dangerous strategy:

> As a result, while the current ignorance of community groups about school system operations serves to avoid overt conflict it also sows the seed for extensive emotion laden future conflicts. It would appear that school system officials must balance the immediate stability and power gained through the withholding of information against the probability of extensive future conflict. In years to come the "critical expertise" for school administrators may be the ability to shape the expectations of environmental groups through the exchange of information rather than simply the ability to manage internal system operations. (p. 14)

Smith (1971) believes that any district with over ten thousand students needs a full-time public relations man, whereas smaller districts can get by with a part-time person. For the part-time staffer he suggests the use of inservice training and publications of The National School Public Relations Association. He advises outside professional help where it is most needed—in planning the program and evaluating objectives. He also cautions against overlooking local professional people willing to volunteer their advisory services.

The National School Boards Association (1970) emphasizes the importance of having written policy guidelines for the public relations program. The association also stresses that, to be effective, the policies should be developed by the board in consultation with key staff members and others concerned with the program.

DESIGNING THE PROGRAM

Once responsibility for the public relations program has been assigned to someone, the program must be organized. There is some agreement in the literature that an effective program should begin with an understanding of the community the school serves.

The workshop on public relations sponsored by the University of Denver School of Education (Nolte and Murrey 1969) emphasized the importance of a

survey of community opinion before constructing a public relations strategy.

Fusco (1967) recommends five steps in the building of a school-community relations program: definition of needs, development of goals, identification of objectives, organization of appropriate programs and activities, and mobilization of school and community resources. He states:

> "Management by objectives" is a means of insuring sound planning. Planning begins with a deliberate delineation of the fundamental *needs* of the clientele to be served and describes why these needs ought to be met. Because community needs may differ markedly, the school administrator who does not know his community, and who is not aware of the aspirations of his citizens regarding the nature and purpose of schooling for their children, will find himself in difficulty. (p. 11)

Others also recognize the importance of this beginning. Weiler and Guertin (1971) provide a checklist of items the school administrator can consider before planning a public relations program. This checklist includes, among other steps, determining the temper of the community.

Atkinson (1971) offers six guidelines to help school administrators understand the communication process and outline a course of action:

1. Decisions relating to communication should be based on an understanding of the community the school serves.
2. The communication activity should involve many individuals.
3. A knowledge of the social and behavioral sciences will help school personnel to plan effective communication.
4. Communication should be so designed that messages reach the desired audience and arouse the intended response.
5. The impact of a communication is influenced by the attention it receives, the source from which it comes, and the action it proposes.
6. The outcome of communication is measured by the tenor of the feedback obtained. (pp. 28-30)

The literature supports the concept, implied in Atkinson's guidelines, that school public relations must be based on two-way communication. The schools must do more than disseminate carefully controlled information; they must listen to the community and provide information commensurate with its needs. As Smith (1971) says: "Better to design your public relations program on the basis of accurate information about the community's perceptions of the schools than to base your information (or public relations) program on what the superintendent thinks the community wants to know" (p. 28).

Assessing Community Attitudes

A successful public relations campaign must answer the public's questions about the schools. There are three basic ways to gather information from the public: surveys and polls, informal face-to-face communication, and meetings between citizen and school representatives. The study of past voting records has also been used, but because it measures only the yes-no vote of what is normally a small percentage of the public, it is not considered very informative.

Surveys and Polls

Surveys and opinion polls are good ways to gain insight into a community's feelings toward the school system.

Stark (1971) describes a program that provides the Oakland County, Michigan, schools with a continuous reading on community attitudes and indicates how much or how little the various segments of the public know about schools. Developed for Oakland Schools, a consulting and advising division of the state system, this plan is called Inforet (information return). Serving as an information feedback system, Inforet offers an authoritative and timely indicator of public opinion.

> **Mail surveys are generally returned by those individuals who are either very pleased with the way things are going or by those who specialize in grinding axes. People in the middle of this continuum rarely respond. The telephone survey cuts across all parts of the continuum and provides true random results.** ***(Banach and Westley 1972, p. 3)***

The system uses volunteers chosen for interest in their district to poll selected individuals concerning certain issues. The poll results are analyzed by Oakland Schools for the price of computer time and materials. Included in the service is assistance in design of the survey and advice from specialists

in technical fields. The program attempts to complete a survey in a month. The cost for a district to have a continuous survey program for a school year is approximately $2,000; a single poll costs about $250. According to Stark, most Inforet polls require only fifteen hours of work by one interviewer to produce 95 percent reliability.

Not all school districts, of course, have the resources to undertake programs similar to that done in Oakland County. There are alternatives. In at least one case, community aides have been used to do survey work in an effort to bridge the communication gap between the school and the home (Hicks 1967). Faculty and students probably could also be used. CFK Ltd. (n.d.) provides a manual for districts interested in making an inexpensive survey using volunteer interviewers.*

INFORMAL COMMUNICATION

Informal face-to-face meetings with members of the community provide two-way communication essential for increasing public understanding and school support.

One innovative method is the "Wednesday Evening Walks" that Dayton, Ohio, administrators, board of education members, and teachers take on publicized routes through parts of the city ("What Schools Are Doing" 1971). The idea is to make school personnel available for personal contact with citizens. After each two-hour walk, the participants return to a base school for a wrap-up session open to anyone.

Some other techniques include grandparent observation of the schools, first-grade teacher visits to the homes of students to be enrolled the next year, and "Breakfast with the Superintendent" and "Breakfast with Your Principal" programs (Trump 1971). The superintendent or principal can host a Saturday breakfast of coffee and doughnuts in a school cafeteria to meet with parents and interested citizens from the school attendance area.

These techniques not only give administrators a chance to test the mood of the community, but are also active attempts to increase good will toward schools. In the face-to-face meeting, each party has a chance to reach a mutual understanding through questions and responses.

A Look into Your School District, published by and available from CFK Ltd., 3333 S. Bannock St., Englewood, Colorado 80110. Single copies free.

Face-to-face communication is so common and universal that its primary importance is often overlooked by busy and often harassed teachers and administrators. It is probably only natural to turn to what I would call the second level of communication, the mass media and the printed message, when attempting to communicate with people whom you seldom or never meet.

(Trump 1971, p. 36)

MEETINGS

Discussions between school representatives and groups of community members represent a more formalized attempt to create school-community dialogue.

The Ohio County school district in West Virginia designed a research project, Community Involvement in Education, to combat public apathy and negative community attitudes (Hoke, Basile, and Whiting 1971). Part of the project, after it got under way, was the promotion of a school bond levy by involving neighborhood leaders in the campaign. Meetings between these leaders, the state tax commissioner, school district administrators, and members of the board of education were held. The authors describe what happened at some of these meetings:

> During subsequent meetings there was a concentrated effort to respond directly to all questions and not to withhold or obscure any information. Feedback from participants was equally candid, giving warning of problems before they surfaced with the general public. (p. 31)

After five such meetings the participants formed action committees that worked to obtain voter approval for the bond issue. The authors note the important role the action committees performed in the successful campaign:

> The action committees helped overcome the problem of communicating with a county of approximately 63,000 citizens. Highly personal communication was facilitated by the ripple effect that worked with the neighborhood leader participants. They served as catalysts by enrolling in their action committees, other small groups of citizens; and those citizens reached others. These small groups involved key officials in almost every business and industry group in Ohio County, bringing influence and expertise to the bond campaign. (p. 32)

Frey (1971) describes a plan a San Diego junior high school used to determine community concerns about the schools and to incorporate community suggestions into the school program. A randomly selected number of parents were asked to volunteer their homes for group meetings of ten to fifteen interested people. The hosts were asked to note the sex, ethnic, and parent-nonparent composition of their groups. A community relations adviser and two parent counselors represented the school at each home discussion. By analyzing the concerns and suggestions expressed by the citizens, the school officials were able to establish a firm base from which to start a public relations program. One result of the program was more frequent meetings among teachers, administrators, and the public in private homes.

Frey, in assessing the program, points to four basic ingredients necessary for success of such a program:

1. a school administrator receptive to change
2. honesty with parents and students
3. follow-through on plans and promises
4. an impartial attitude by the community relations adviser (p. 17)

These examples show how a few school districts, by assessing community attitudes, have built a sound foundation for a program to improve attitudes toward the schools. These methods also serve to improve relations because they indicate the school's willingness to listen to the community.

INFORMING THE PUBLIC

Once the public relations director has accurate information on the community's attitude toward the schools, he can begin a public information program designed specially for his district.

Essential to the success of a public relations campaign is the realization there are many "publics" to reach. Fusco (1967) provides an overlapping list of twenty-three publics that should be considered.

> **With the public demanding accountability from its school officials and teachers, the most important aspect of your school public relations program should be honest, factual and frequent information about how well *or how poorly* students are doing in school.**
> *(Smith 1971, p. 28)*

An important distinction is between a district's internal and external publics. Internally, the program should include school district employees. Through meetings or newsletters, employees can be kept informed of the district's achievements and needs so they will be sources of complete, factual information to all who come in contact with them.

Methods for reaching the external public are numerous. The most obvious method is the use of existing public media:

- news releases to the radio, television, and newspapers serving the community
- interviews with administrators, teachers, and board members on radio and television
- television programs produced by the district

Districts can also use other media such as:

- brochures
- slide shows
- movies
- bumper stickers
- billboards

Direct person-to-person communication includes the following methods:

- citizen advisory groups
- speakers' bureaus supplying students, staff members, citizen specialists, and special resource speakers
- public forums
- lectures
- surveys and polls
- home visits
- parent counseling nights
- school open houses
- adult education programs

These efforts should be conducted on a continuing basis, not only at budget election times. One program that requires a firm commitment from the district to listen to and involve citizens is the citizen advisory group; once begun, such groups usually cannot be withdrawn without creating controversy. Properly used, citizen advisory groups fulfill a multitude of functions. As a liaison between the schools and the community, the groups can participate in the hiring of teachers and administrators, offer opinions on new curriculum innovations and textbook selection, and engage in other similar activities (Gromacki 1966).

This list of public relations approaches is by no means complete. Fusco provides the most extensive list found in one source, while other references

furnish additional ideas and explain the specifics of implementing them.

Banach and Westley (1972) report on a successful financial election campaign that indicates how several public relations methods can be blended in one unified program. The first of seven steps they recommend as basic to a school finance campaign is analysis. The authors stress the usefulness of opinion surveys as an analysis tool. After a poll revealed attitudes of parents, teachers, students, and voters, the campaign strategy focused on reaching specific publics. The techniques used to reach voters included canvassing by mail, by phone, and in person. Citizen advisory groups were also consulted. In addition, electronic data processing equipment was extensively employed; the authors indicate, however, that a district without such equipment can develop a similar publications program.

> **Community variables were helpful in learning why people vote "no." It was acknowledged that unless shown a valid need, people would invent reasons for voting against any new taxes. It was important to identify every possible rationalization that was operating to defeat the bond issue and to design a technique of communication to answer rationalizations identified.**
>
> ***(Hoke and others 1971, p. 31)***

Several publications discuss public relations considerations involved in specific administrative tasks. Harrison (1971) recommends keeping the public informed of building needs. Johnson (1971) shows how to improve public relations while selecting a new superintendent. Lieber (1971) describes a method for determining whether the local newspaper is presenting financial referendum information in a positive or negative way. Young (1968) proposes a program to develop positive community relations through careful textbook selection. And finally, an article in *School Management*, "Telling the Election Story," presents ideas for including business and professional people in business education public relations.

Publications of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) are good sources of information on communication techniques. Each of three volumes in the *Public Relations Gold Mine* series (Preusch 1966, 1967, and 1968) presents several articles dealing with numerous facets of school public relations. The NSPRA newsletter *Trends* provides up-to-date information on public relations techniques used by schools across the country. *Communication Ideas in Action*, an NSPRA report (1970), advises school systems of the numerous public relations resources available and challenges schools to put communication ideas into action. The ideas described have been developed in many different school districts. *The Schools and the Press* (Lewis 1965), another NSPRA publication, acquaints the school administrator with the need for good press relations and suggests ways to obtain them.

Other sources of information on press relations are two works by Lance ([1967] and 1968), who shows state department of education personnel how to strengthen their relations with the news media.

Conclusion

Polls indicate the public wants more information on more specific topics than the schools are providing. Whatever the reasons for the school's failure to communicate—lack of skills, unawareness of the public's information needs, or interpretation of interest as opposition—the result has been a credibility gap that may explain many school-community conflicts.

Fortunately, the literature suggests a way to bridge the gap: a public relations program designed to answer the community's questions about the schools. Rather than guessing what the public wants to know or withholding information in the hope the public will do what it is asked, an effective public relations program is based on finding out what the community wants to know.

Financial election results are not the only measure of a public relations program, but they are a concrete indication of the public's willingness to support the schools. Judging by the number of election successes mentioned in the literature reviewed, it appears that the public relations techniques discussed can, in the hands of a competent public relations director, overcome the credibility gap and significantly improve school-community relations.

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